

'Annie Jr.' comes to South Valley Civic Theatre stage this month

Oakwood 7th-grader Tegan Leong plays "spunky" title role

by [Marty Cheek](#) | Apr 6, 2018

*Published in the April 11 – 24,
2018 Issue of Morgan Hill Life*

Everyone's favorite redheaded orphan finds herself making friends and facing adventures as she searches for her parents in the musical "Annie Jr." opening April 20 in the Morgan Hill Community Playhouse. Oakwood School seventh-grader Tegan Leong plays the spunky title character in the South Valley Civic Theatre's children's version of the Tony Award-winning show. She's accompanied on the stage by two golden retrievers, Bailey and Mason, who alternate between shows playing the role of the stray mutt Sandy.



Tegan Leong with "Sandy" at a rehearsal of "Annie Jr." The South Valley Civic Theatre show opens April 20 at the Morgan Hill Community Playhouse. Photo by Marty Cheek

With equal measures of pluck and positivity, Leong as the little orphan charms her way into people's hearts in 1930s New York City. Annie is determined to find her mother and father who abandoned her years ago on the doorstep of an orphanage run by a mean-spirited woman named Miss Hannigan (played by Isabella Rosal). With Sandy's help, Annie eventually foils Miss Hannigan's cruel machinations, finding a new home and family in billionaire Oliver Warbucks (played by James Tuttle) and his personal secretary, Grace Farrell (played by Leah Grifall).

"The show is amazing," Leong said. "It's such a challenging role because Annie has so many different sides to her. She's angry, happy, and sad. It's a new experience for me and I love it."

This is the second time the 13-year-old has played an orphan in an SVCT show. She got her start on the stage playing the lost-in-London little boy Oliver in the children's musical "Oliver!" in 2014. Among her other performances, in 2015 she played the part of Mushu the dragon in "Mulan Jr." In 2016, she played the comical role of the red Jamaican crab Sebastian in "The Little Mermaid Jr."

Leong loves putting a vivacious energy into the role of Annie. The show won the Tony Award for Best Musical. Songs include hit tunes such as "Tomorrow" and "It's the Hard Knock Life."

"It's an old classic, and we love to breathe life into an old classic," Leong said. "Oh, my gosh! The whole theater experience is amazing. Everyone is working toward a goal, and it can't happen without everybody working together."

The character of Annie has a tremendous amount of intelligence and a can-do spirit disguising the unhappiness of an orphan, she said.

“She has a lot of spunk and energy, but underneath that all, she’s sad and she’s hanging in there. But she covers it up with her attitude,” she said. “She gets up and out there and she decides to continue going on for her friends and herself. She knows that if you just sit there and wallow in your sadness, that’s not going to take you anywhere.”

The SVCT version of the show will be a unique one because the director and producers have added “little quirks and tweaks” to keep the audience thoroughly entertained, she said.

“And they definitely need to come for the dog. Everybody loves dogs. He’s adorable,” she said. “Both dogs are really well trained. I hope it’ll go well for the dogs on stage.”

Leong enjoys making friends with other children playing Annie’s fellow orphans who must deal with the nastiness of Miss Hannigan. And she’s having fun performing with Tuttle as the cranky old Daddy Warbucks whom Annie eventually enchants, she said.

“Daddy Warbucks is a hard core solid, classic businessman who listens to no one,” she said. “Annie really gets to him because she’s not intimidated by him. As the play progresses, he suddenly starts softening up and he realizes, ‘Wow, this kid is OK. I like kids.’ It’s a good message.”